

Legend and History Of the Caverns Of *Cacahuamilpa*¹

Sergio Santana Muñoz*



Elle Montiel

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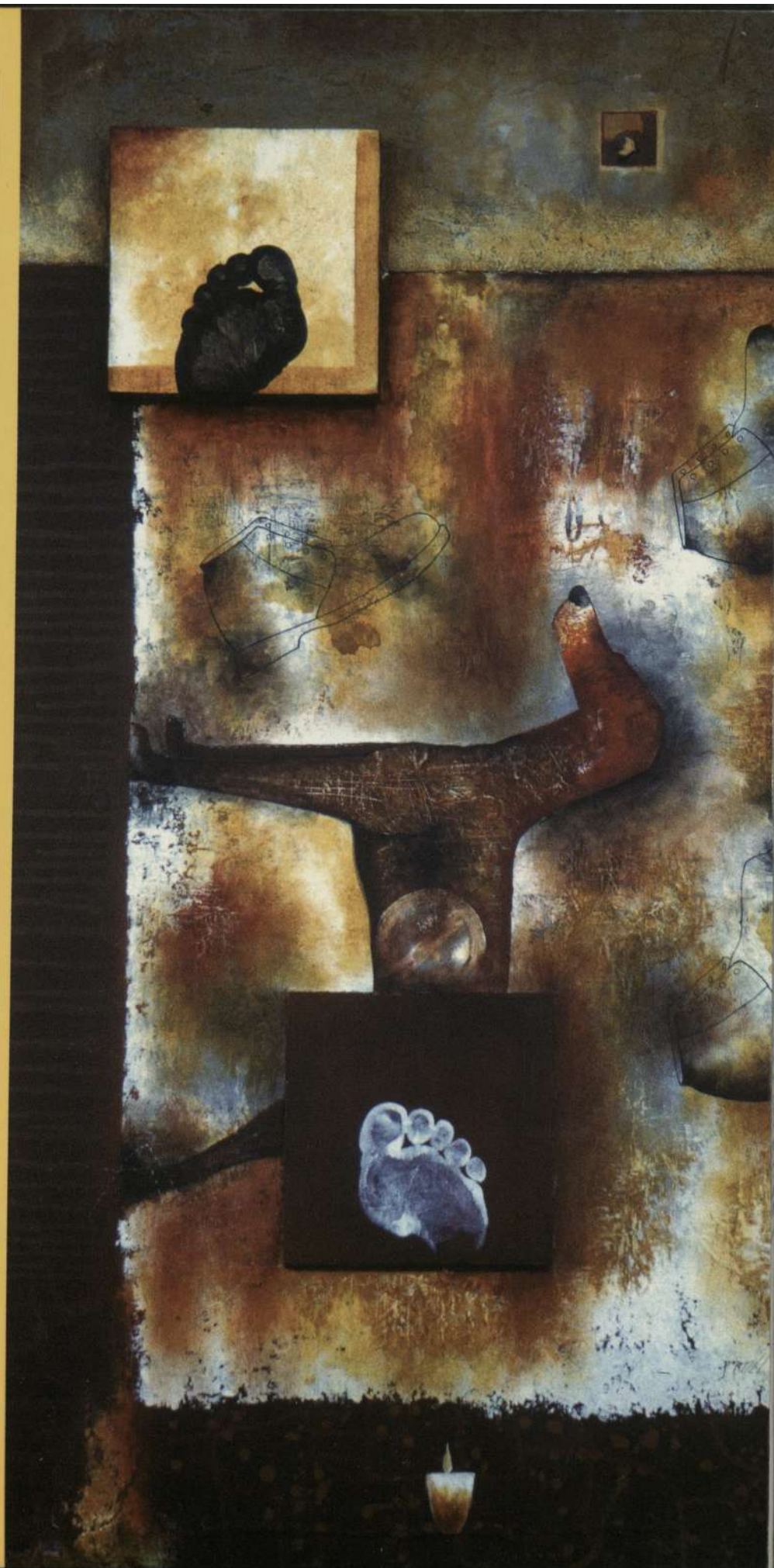
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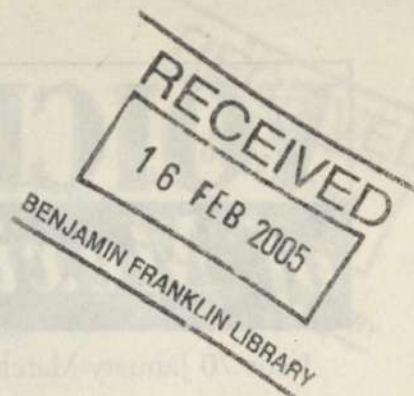


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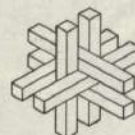
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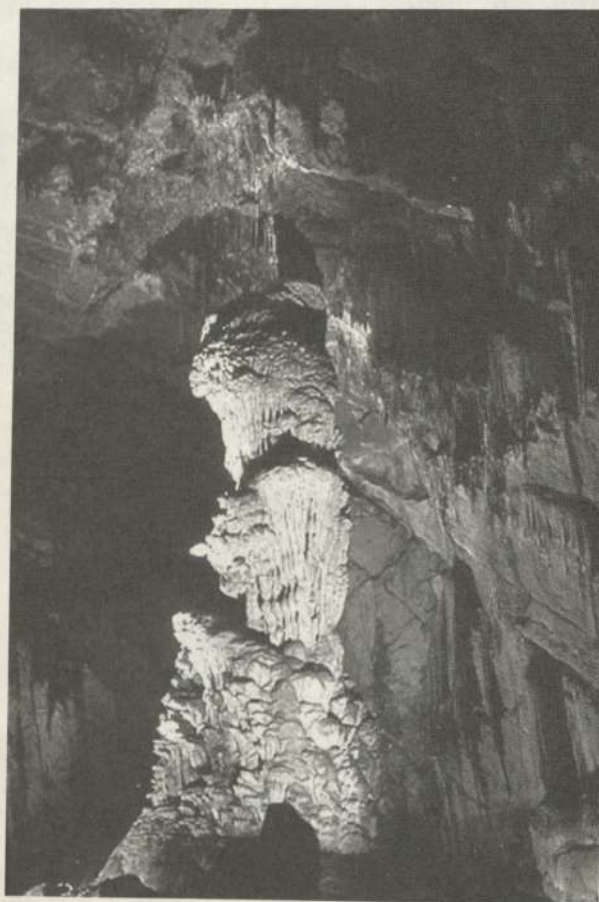
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Cover

Jesús Portillo, *Ironie Errant 2*, 120 x 60 cm, 2004
(mixed techniques on wood).

Back Cover

Jesús Portillo, *Bottom of the Ladder*, 130 x 90 cm, 2001
(oil on canvas).

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Legend and History Of the Caverns Of *Cacahuamilpa*¹

Sergio Santana Muñoz*



Elsie Montiel

Since their discovery many centuries ago, the Caverns of Cacahuamilpa, one of the world's most majestic cave formations, have been the object of study and scientific exploration as well as the scene for rituals and a refuge for warriors and men on the run from the law. It is said that in pre-Hispanic times, the indigenous people who inhabited the surrounding area did not dare enter the caves—which they called *salachi*—because they believed that the stalagmites and stalactites were the embodiment of evil spirits who pre-

vented their entering. Less superstitious people would put an end to that legend by showing that the site was not as evil as had been thought.

Legend has it that in those times, near Tepitac, a local tribal chieftain was deposed and began to roam the mountains in search of a safe haven. During his wanderings, he discovered these enormous caverns and was not only awestruck at the spectacle, but right there thought up a stratagem to recover his throne. Determined to win, he spoke to one of his daughters who no one else knew and taught her to pass herself off as a deity to the rest of their

* Mexican cave expert.



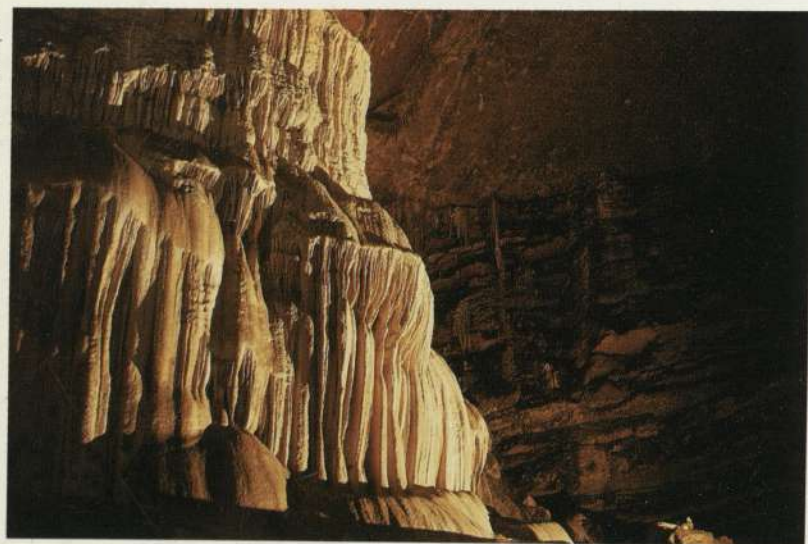
"The Champagne Bottle."
Photo: Elsie Montiel

Chateau de la Vierge

can poet Gabriela Mistral, who dedicated a famous poem to the caverns; and intellectuals and writers like Mariano Escobedo, Manuel Orozco y Berra and Ignacio Comonfort, among others.

The part of the caverns opened to the public in 1920 include 20 "rooms," separated by enormous walls of natural rock and connected by a gallery. Inside, the ceilings are between 30 and 70 meters high. Local people have named the rooms according to the "figures" they seem to represent: for example, the porch, the jewel

Rubén Vázquez



box, the dawn, the curtains, the throne, the dome and the arms plaza. After a two-kilometer journey along a walkway illuminated by artificial light—since no source of natural light penetrates here—going through the different rooms, the appreciation of its beauty and its whimsical formations will always depend on each person's imagination, which may consider the place an act of fantasy or fiction, comparable perhaps to a story in "A Thousand and One Nights." The truth is that the Cacahuamilpa Caverns are and have been the world's most majestic and frequently visited complex of caves.

The caves go beyond where the usual visitor can go since they are part of an extensive, partially underground, hydrological system fed mainly by the Chontalcutlán and San Jerónimo

Rivers, which emerge and join after a long run through the bowels of the mountain range. The most accepted theory about the caves' origin is that they resulted from tectonic activity, the collision of underground plates, which created fissures or cracks in the limestone. Into these cracks filtered underground water rich in carbon dioxide, combining with other factors like pressure and temperature to form cavities and protrusions.

The site was declared a national park on April 23, 1936, by presidential decree signed by Lázaro Cárdenas. The decree stipulates that the state authorities who manage the site had to give 25 percent of the proceeds to local inhabitants. But this was never carried out, so the communities decided to demand their rights from the Ministry of Tourism. Since they were unsuccessful, they agreed to take over the caves until the debt had been paid. Today, the caverns are managed by the Union of Inhabitants of Communities in Possession of the National Cacahuamilpa Caverns Park.

The park has two caverns, the Cacahuamilpa and the Carlos Pacheco; two galleries; two underground rivers (the Chontacuatla and the San Jerónimo); and two chasms. In the medium term, the park management plans to create interpretative walkways, rough cabins, a hanging bridge over the river, visits to the chasms, trips on horseback, rides down the subterranean rivers and along the rapids, as well as adventure sports like rappelling and rock-climbing. For all of this, they will have the advisory services of experts. The management has also professionally trained its staff in caving.

These caverns are located in the Taxco de Alarcón municipality, 36 kilometers from the city of Taxco, near the border with the State of Mexico, 146 kilometers from Mexico City and 68 kilometers from Cuernavaca. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Information taken from the book by José Rebolledo Iglesias, the Cacahuamilpa Caverns manager from 1962 to 1971, *Grutas de Cacahuamilpa*.

people. Then, he went to visit an elder who had remained loyal to him and took him to the cavern to witness the divine apparition.

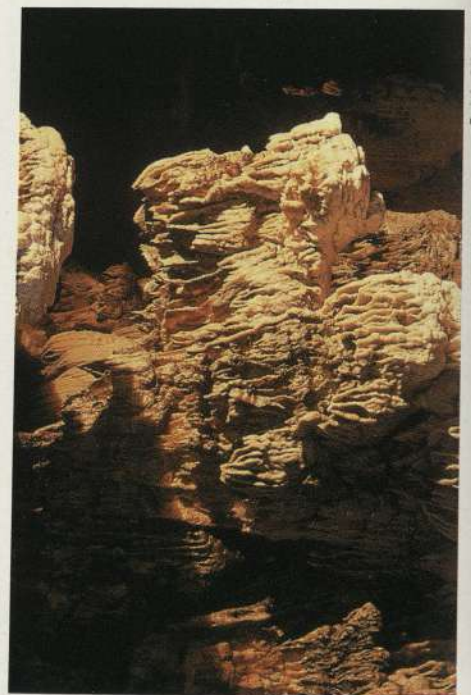
The old man returned to his tribe, frightened, and told his story of what had happened in the cavern. Followed by the tribe elders and others, he visited the place again. The "divine one" was on a marvelous formation at the center of the

The entry to the caverns was covered by thick vegetation for years, so only someone who knew about them could find them. Taking advantage of this, during the war of independence, Pedro Ascencio de Alquisiras, a native of the area and one of the right arms of General Vicente Guerrero, the man who finally won independence, often used them to hide his guerril-

Going through the different rooms, the appreciation of its beauty and its whimsical formations will always depend on each person's imagination, which may consider the place an act of fantasy or fiction.



Elic Montiel



Rubén Vázquez

cavern. As soon as she saw them enter, she raised her voice in a threatening shout, saying that she would wipe out the region with the fires of hell if they did not restore the deposed prince to his throne and beg his forgiveness. Seemingly, the stratagem was not only successful, but the tribe continued to worship the secret, mysterious sanctuary of the false deity for a very long time. According to another legend, this cavern was inhabited by the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc, whose name means "eagle who falls on its prey."

las. They would come out to do battle with the Spanish soldiers, who they defeated several times; but when they were beaten, they hid in the caverns, frustrating their pursuers, who eventually gave up the search.

Later, Ascencio de Alquisiras would use the interior of the caverns to hide silver, gold, jewels and money that he took from the Spaniards around Taxco and the surrounding areas.

The indigenous inhabitants of the town of Cacahuamilpa carefully hid the existence of the caves from the Spanish invaders until in 1834,

when Mexico was already independent, they hid Don Manuel Sáenz de la Peña, a highly respected rich merchant from the town of Tetecala wanted by the authorities for having injured another man in a violent quarrel.

Some time later, once Sáenz returned home, he surprised the people of Tetecala with his fantastic stories of what he had seen inside the caverns. Moved by these stories, the town's inhabitants organized the first recorded excursion to the site.

Another legend says that the famous bandit Agustín Lorenzo, the terror of the region, used

Bells) in Querétaro, one of the victorious leaders of the republic who later became president of Mexico wrote underneath the empress's words, "Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada went beyond this point."

On March 21, 1881, General Porfirio Díaz visited the spot, with his wife Carmen Romero Rubio and a large party. At the banquet given there for him, the famous composer Juventino Rosas debuted his marvelous waltz *Carmen*, composed in honor of the general's wife.

One of the most charming tales of a visit to the caves was written by Doña Francisca Cal-



Elsie Montiel

the caverns as one of his hide-outs, foiling persistent searches by law enforcement. Popular legend has it that on nights with a full moon, a throng of horses and riders said to be the souls of Agustín Lorenzo and his men can be seen coming out of the caverns.

In 1866, the Empress Carlota Amalia visited the caverns, and in the Palm Room wrote, "María Carlota was here," in Spanish on the wall. Years later, in 1872, when the monarchy had been overthrown and Emperor Maximilian shot on the Cerro de las Campanas (Hill of the

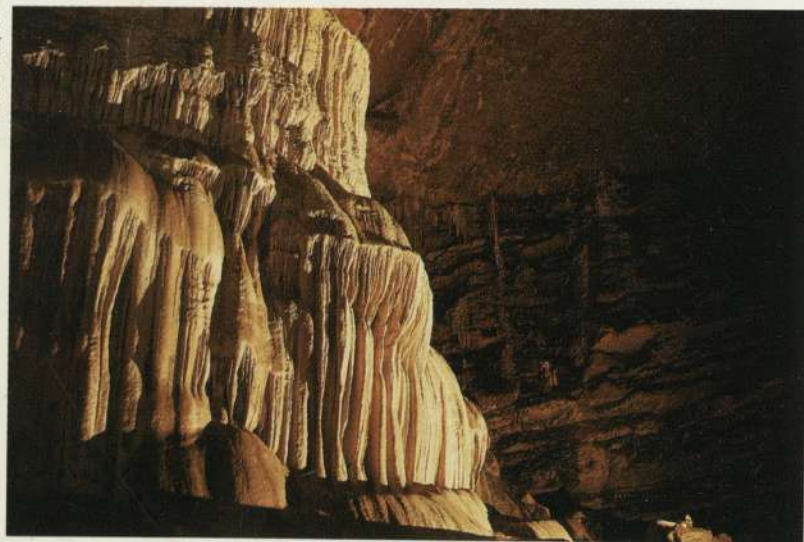
derón de la Barca, wife of Spain's first ambassador to Mexico after independence. It is published as letter 33 in her book of correspondence, *La vida de México* (Life in Mexico).

Stories and legends abound, making it difficult to collect them all. Many famous people have visited the caverns, attracted by the beauty of Mexico's underground world. Among them are General Antonio López de Santa Ana; Presidents Emilio Portes Gil and Adolfo López Mateos; the intellectual Guillermo Prieto; the geographer Alexander von Humboldt; the Chil-

ean poet Gabriela Mistral, who dedicated a famous poem to the caverns; and intellectuals and writers like Mariano Escobedo, Manuel Orozco y Berra and Ignacio Comonfort, among others.

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